

EARLY DAYS OF SPS RECALLED BY FIRST CHAIRMAN

By: Frank Sanborn

The need for a separate section of the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club devoted to hiking, camping and climbing in the Sierra was evident to many for several years. Base campers, High Trippers and the Desert Peaks Section had for many years sponsored and scheduled trips into the Sierra, but it was apparent that the mountains which inspired the birth of the Sierra Club deserved a section devoted exclusively to their exploration, protection and enjoyment. The advent of modern paved highways and fast cars made it as practical to consider conducting weekend hikes into the Sierra as far north as Bridgeport as it was to hike into the Angeles Crest area.

Beginning in 1952, non-scheduled trips into the Sierra were conducted with ever-increasing frequency by an ever-growing number of enthusiasts. Impetus was given this movement by the fact that the Desert Peaks Section scheduled an average of only three hikes per year into the Sierra. This was felt to be a waste of many fine weekends from May through October. By 1955, the non-scheduled trips outnumbered scheduled ones about six to one.



John W. Robinson (left) and Frank Sanborn (right)
on summit of San Jacinto Peak c. mid-1950s.

Such long-term Sierra enthusiasts as Bob Sheller, Miles Brubacher, Barbara Lilley, Lee Owings, Owen Blackburn, Frank Bressel, Pat Meixner (Gentry), Chuck Miller, John Robinson, Bud Bingham and Frank Sanborn decided that the time was ripe to organize the Sierra Peaks Section.



Chuck Miller on SPS trip to North Palisade
September 6 1959

Late in July, 1955, Frank, Chuck and Pat went before the Executive Committee, informed it of the intent to organize the section and requested official permission to form the SPS. After due deliberation, the Executive Committee granted official permission to organize within the framework of the Sierra Club. Thus the Sierra Peaks Section was formally launched on its highly successful career under the initial direction of the above-named people. The first list of emblem and qualifying peaks was drafted and approved by the Management Committee, and the previously drafted by-laws were approved and put into force.

By the end of 1955, the section had 38 members, and monthly business meetings were being held at the Sierra Club headquarters in downtown Los Angeles. These meetings have been well-attended from the beginning and attest to the interest and activity of section members.

The most essential step, of course, was to draft a set of by-laws, a statement of purpose and a list of emblem and qualifying peaks. An interim slate of officers had to be selected to guide the affairs of the section until the first regular election could be held. Finally, official recognition and approval by the Chapter Executive Committee had to be obtained.

Frank Sanborn was selected as the first chairman of the SPS, Bob Sheller the vice chairman, Pat Meixner the secretary, Leo Scotti the treasurer and Frank Bressel the alternate officer. Miles Brubacher headed the first mountaineering committee.



Miles Brubacher
Mammoth Mountain. 1958



Barbara Lilley near Avawatz Peak
November 15 1950

One of the main purposes of the section was, and is, to schedule weekend trips into the Sierra for the purpose of familiarizing Sierra Club members and others with California's premier mountains and fostering comradeship among those interested in this activity. Enjoyment of, as well as knowledge of, the trails, peaks, meadows, campsites, lakes, streams, forests, valleys and wildlife of the Sierra has been of primary interest.

The original 12 emblem peaks were from south to north, Olancha Peak, Kaweah Peak, Mt. Whitney, Mt. Williamson, Mt. Brewer, Mt. Sill, Mt. Goddard, Mt. Darwin, Mt. Ritter, Mt. Abbot, Mt. Lyell and Matterhorn Peak.

The present emblem of the SPS was drawn up by Bud Bingham in March, 1956, and promptly adopted. A beautiful piece of work, it shows the distinctive emblem peak, Mt. Williamson, in profile, with white Sierra summer clouds floating overhead, snow on the flanks and pine boughs intertwined underneath. The climbing of the 10 emblem peaks entitled a member to wear the emblem of the section. By the end of 1956, the section boasted 18 emblem

holders.

By the late fall of 1956, the section was well established. Some by-law changes had been proposed and adopted by the membership, the monthly meetings were well attended and committees on social affairs and safety were being set up or discussed. Membership had more than doubled from the previous December, with a total of 62 enrolled.



Bud Bingham on SPS trip to Sill
July 27 1958

The officers who guided the affairs of the section through 1955 and 1956 felt that the time had now come for the first of what were to be annual elections. Candidates for the various management offices were listed, and balloting was conducted by mail. As a result of this first full election, the following persons were elected to guide the affairs of the section in 1957: Bud Bingham, chairman; John Robinson, vice chairman; Barbara Lilley, secretary; Pat Meixner, treasurer; and Frank Sanborn, alternate officer. This group officially took over the management of the affairs of the section in January, 1957. It had been decided earlier that no officer could be re-elected for a second consecutive year in the same post. Chuck Miller became head of the Mountaineering and Schedule Committee.

In 1956, the section began its main function, that of scheduling weekend trips into the Sierra. The first scheduled SPS trip was led by Frank Sanborn and John Robinson, to Deer Mountain, near



Roger Gaefcke hiking behind Bea Wheelock in the rain, Palm Canyon February 29, 1959

the South Fork of the Kern River, on May 5-6, 1956. On May 26-27, Frank Sanborn and Miles Brubacher took an SPS group to Maggie Mountain, in the Balch Park area east of Porterville. George Wallerstein and Steve Wilkie led a trip to Mt. Gilbert, back of South Lake, on June 2-3. Frank Sanborn and Ted Maier took a group to Trail Peak in Cottonwood Basin on June 9-10. On June 23-24, Don Clarke and Bud Bingham led an assault on the northernmost emblem peak, 12,281-foot Matterhorn Peak, in northern Yosemite west of Bridgeport. It was a memorable climb of one of our most beautiful peaks and involved uses of crampons, ice axes and ropes. Twenty-eight persons made the climb.

On June 30-July 1, Chuck Miller led a large group (38 persons) to Alta Peak, back of Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park. On July 7-8, Miles Brubacher and Pat Meixner led a very interesting trip out of Whitney Portal to the 14,495-foot summit of Mt. Whitney, the highest emblem peak. On July 14-15, Izzy Lieberman and Miles Brubacher led a challenging climb of 13,157-foot Mt. Ritter, the emblem peak dominating the Lake Ediza-Minarets region. Frank Bressel and Chuck Miller took an SPS group from Cedar Grove, in Kings Canyon, to Goat Mountain on July 28-29. On August 11-12, Chuck Miller tackled University Peak with a group from Onion Valley. One of the most impressive emblem peaks, Mt. Darwin, fell to

a group led by Bob Sheller and Leo Scotti, hiking from North Lake (out of Bishop) on August 18-19. This 13,841-foot peak, plus its neighbor, Mt. Lamarck, provided this group with plenty of action. Frank Bressel led a trip to Mt. Irvine, out of Whitney Portal in the Meysan Lakes area on 'August 25-26.

The climax of this very active summer came on the long Labor Day weekend of Sept. 1-3, when John Robinson led a large group up George Creek to the 14,385-foot summit of Mt. Williamson. This trip, to the most distinctive emblem peak east of the Sierra crest near Independence, was a great success, although it involved a gain of 10,000 feet from the cars in rugged, trail-less country. Mt. Barnard and Trojan Peak were also climbed on the trip.



Meixner in a publicity photo for Kelty Packs

Frank Bressel and Pat Meixner took a group to Mt. Silliman, between Giant Forest and Kings Canyon, on Sept. 8-9. Bud Bingham and Don Clarke, leading a rugged trip over Taboose Pass to Cardinal Mountain on Sept. 15-16, were clobbered by an early-season snowstorm, but made the peak anyway under very adverse conditions. Mt. Morrison, overlooking Convict Lake, is one of the few Sierra peaks that can be done in one day without knapsacking. Miles Brubacher and Izzy Lieberman led a pleasant but steep climb of it on Sept. 22-23. George Wallerstein and Bud Bingham led a group from Whitney Portal around Tulainyo Lake (highest in North America) to Tunnabora Peak on Sept. 29-30.

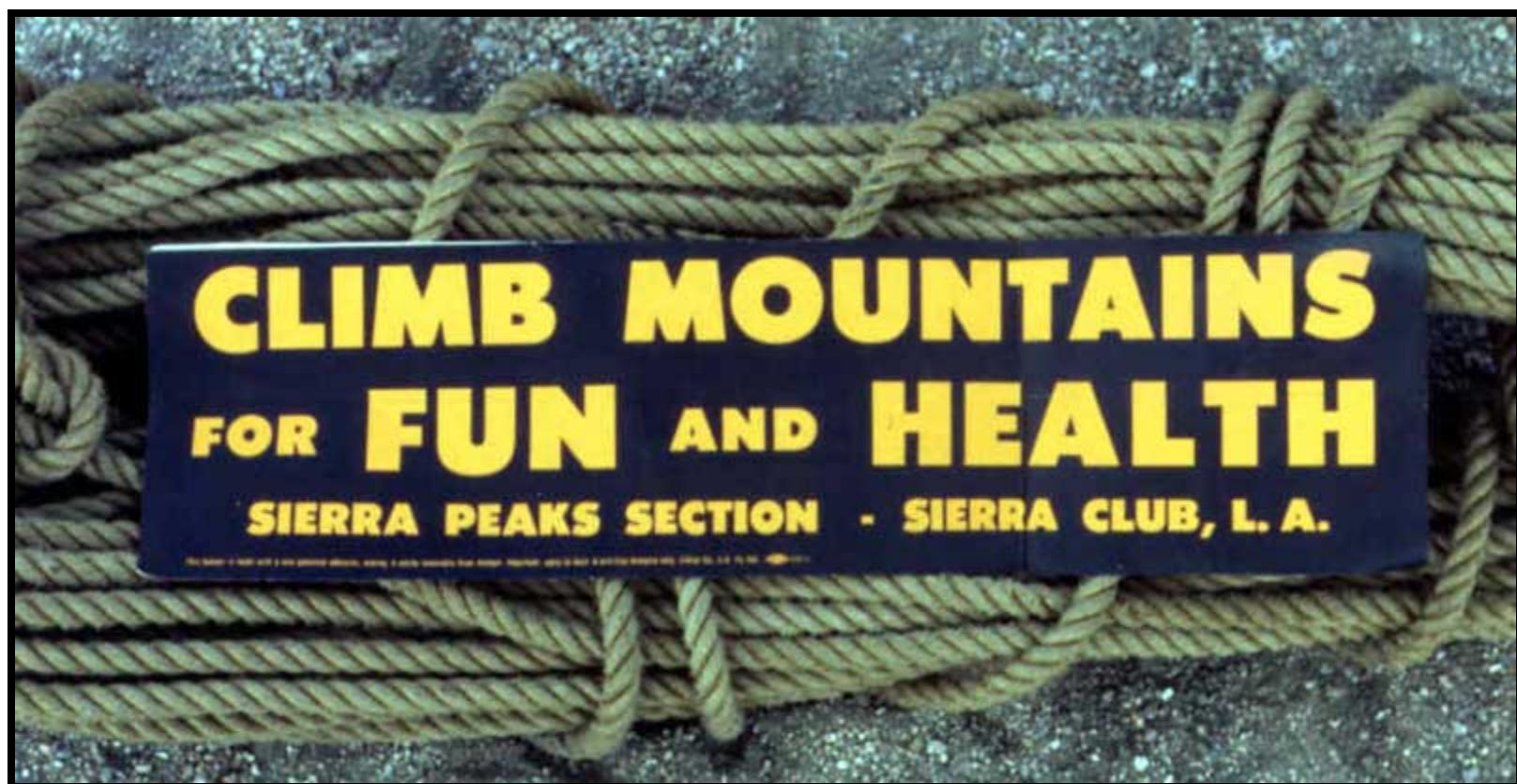


Sample of arrows widely used by SPS leaders in the 1960's to direct participants to roadheads. Courtesy of Jerry Keating

John Robinson was to lead a group from Onion Valley over Kearsarge Pass to Mt. Rixford on Oct. 6-7. Heavy snow prevented this, but an attempt was made on University Peak. A severe blizzard forced intrepid climbers off the steep northeast ridge of University, so that weekend was a loss.

On Oct. 20-21, the section joined the Desert Peakers in a joint climb of strenuous Peak 11,107,

north of Mt. Keynot on the crest of the Inyo Range. John Robinson, Bud Bingham and Bob Bear spearheaded this group, which named the peak Mt. Inyo. This name has since become official. The final SPS-scheduled trip of 1956 was to the southernmost qualifying peak, 8,475-foot Owens Peak. It was led by Miles Brubacher and Pat Meixner on Nov. 11. Here again, no knapsacking was necessary.



All of the mentioned trips into the Sierra were officially scheduled activities, entered in the schedule books of the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club. When it is remembered that the average number of trips scheduled by the Angeles Chapter (usually by the Desert Peaks Section) into the Sierra used to be only three annually, it can readily be appreciated that the SPS in 1956, fulfilled its mission of scheduling many trips. This set the pattern for succeeding years. In addition, the trips extended from early May to early November, putting to rest the old notion that the Sierra was accessible only from the Fourth of July to the end of September. Now Sierra Peaks groups are active virtually all year in the Sierra, falling back upon the southern areas in the winter.

It was decided at the November, 1956, meeting to begin publication of a newspaper for the section, keeping its members informed of what each was doing, providing information on future trips, and giving writeups of past trips, both scheduled and non-scheduled. Roger Gaefcke suggested the name Sierra Echo for the paper, and this was unanimously adopted. Its editorship was undertaken by John Robinson, who turned out the Echo every three months in Mimeograph form [actually, Ditto spirit duplicator form-Ed.]. With the appearance of the first Echo in February, 1957, this history is terminated. The Echo carries the SPS record beyond that point.

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